



Reflections on Friends of the Koala's Contribution Northern Rivers Region of New South Wales

Lorraine Vass, Patron and Past President (2002-2017), Friends of the Koala, Inc.

Concern for the survival of koalas in the wild has increased in recent years. Public opinion is driving governments to come up with laws to effectively protect koalas and their habitat and to initiate activities which will mitigate declining koala numbers. While legal protection for the koala has been unachievable, investing taxpayers' money on partnerships with those communities that have become responsive to the plight of their koala populations is occurring. It is pleasing

to see koala recovery becoming everyone's business; however, the probability of local and even regional extinctions remains, sadly, very real.

The Northern Rivers region of New South Wales is renowned for its rich biodiversity. Many rare and endangered flora and fauna species are found here. Wildlife abounds. Koalas are widely distributed although often in low densities. Remnant populations move through a large area of urban

Lismore and several of the region's towns and villages. It should be difficult not to be koala-aware because so many of us are privileged to share our lives with them, but of course, that's not the case.

While healthy koala populations are known to exist in more remote localities, habitat loss and fragmentation, disease, vehicle strikes, dog attacks, wild-fire, climate change and other human-related threats are



FOK's operations extend over an area of over 10,500 square kilometres. It includes the local government areas of Tweed, Kyogle, Byron, Ballina, Lismore and Richmond Valley and small parts of Clarence and Tenterfield. Our 'backyard' is large, varied and challenging. Trained volunteers operate a 24/7 rescue service from a central facility in East Lismore. From 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018, 368 koalas were admitted into the FOK facility in Lismore, half of all koala admissions in New South Wales; 676 sightings of koalas were also reported to FOK from across the region.

While the Northern Rivers does not yet have a wildlife hospital, FOK can ensure that koalas admitted into care receive cutting edge treatments and rehabilitation care. It is through FOK's close relationship with the Keen Street Veterinary Clinic in Lismore, the Currumbin Wildlife Hospital on Queensland's Gold Coast, the Australia Zoo Wildlife Hospital on the Sunshine Coast, the University of Sydney's Koala Health Hub and of course, FOK's trained rescuers and carers, that the koalas are able to receive such treatment.

Koalas brought into care are rehabilitated in the group's Koala Care Centre or in homecare. Many koalas are found very near to death or are dead on arrival. The 20 percent that do survive can take a very long time to reach full recovery and be released back into the wild. Appropriate medication and leaf selection (harvested daily) for each animal are integral to successful rehabilitation as is physiotherapy and, in the case of orphans, socialisation.

As well as its licensed rehabilitation and release activities, FOK works with state agencies, local councils, non-government organisations, community groups and individual landholders to protect and extend koala habitat. Its plant nursery has propagated around 170,000 koala food trees from locally collected seed which have been planted across the Northern Rivers. FOK applies for project funding under a range of grant programs including the NSW Environmental Trust and partners or

Above: Friends of the Koala's Care and Research Centre in East Lismore comprises an administration and education centre, a triage, treatment and pathology clinic, a native plant nursery, outdoor enclosures for koala rehabilitation and garaging for two koala rescue vans.

to Koala Conservation in the

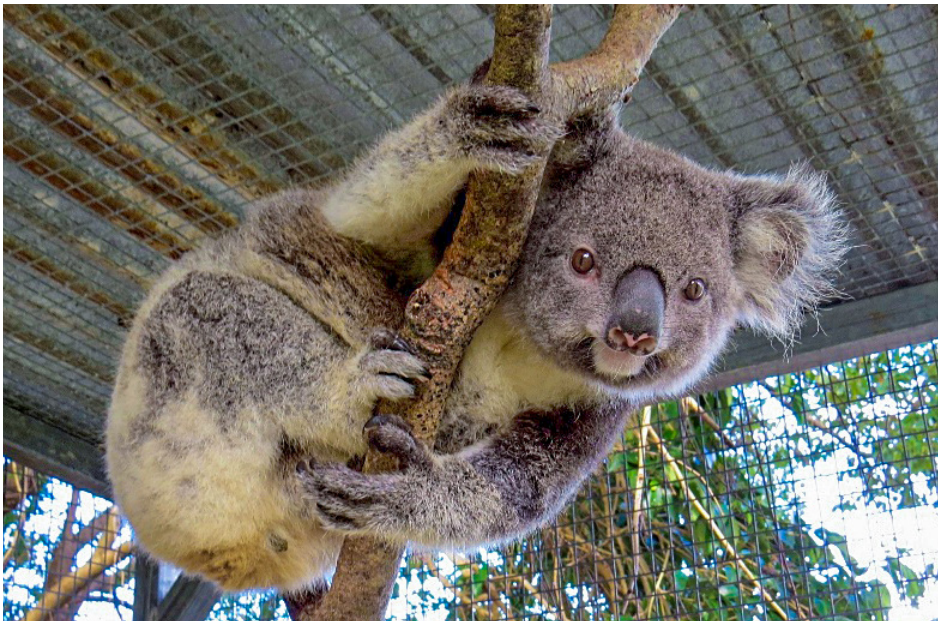
inflicting a heavy toll. In 2016 the NSW Scientific Committee declared the Tweed-Byron Coast koalas between the Tweed and Brunswick Rivers, east of the Pacific Highway, to be Endangered.

Friends of the Koala (FOK), is the Northern Rivers' peak koala conservation organisation. Formed in 1986, in response to habitat loss in the Lismore area, Chapters of FOK also sprang up in the Tweed and on the Lower Richmond. In 1989 the group

commenced rescuing and rehabilitating koalas under the guidance of the Lismore District Office of the National Parks & Wildlife Service, becoming licensed in January 1993. Those early days set the group's core business of licensed koala rescue, rehabilitation and release; habitat protection and enhancement; community education; and advocacy and policy reform; to which research assistance and an active and expanded membership were added at a later stage.



One of two rescue vans, used to retrieve injured and orphaned koalas.



Kim's birds-eye view of the world.



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supports others in their applications. It writes submissions on rezoning and development applications large and small, planning instruments and policy issues impacting koalas. It participates in community consultation processes, actively campaigns on some matters and has expanded its community education capacity. Increasingly FOK is sought after to partner in koala research projects.

Koala conservation is a complex and often politically-charged undertaking, and this is especially true in the Northern Rivers where our already highly-modified landscapes are under pressure from more people, whether they are relocating or merely visiting our beautiful part of the world, as well as from agricultural and forestry enterprises.

FOK hears a lot about the 50 percent decline in koala numbers and distribution in New South Wales's north east over the past 20 years; however, the trend is not uniform. Lismore's koalas, for example, may be benefitting from planted windbreaks which are enabling their expansion into previously unoccupied areas in the north of the local government area. Of course, ensuring the protection of those planted windbreaks is no easy task because they fall outside native vegetation legislation. The region's highest koala density persists in Lismore's south east with an estimated population of 1,800 occupying 70 percent of available habitat.



Friends of the Koala has a long history of campaigning on koala issues. The "Prevent Extinction" campaign was launched in 2018 to engage the Northern Rivers community in koala protection across the region.

Without the voice FOK has given koalas for more than three decades, I doubt our native koalas would be hanging on at all in some areas. While supporters may delight in the privilege of living with koalas and willingly take on some degree of responsibility for their survival, most people have other priorities. Fierce competition for land occupancy between humans and koalas means that time is running out.

I am not suggesting that koala recovery is achievable throughout the Northern Rivers, but I believe it will succeed in some parts if effective conservation strategies are identified and supported; if the community exerts its political will; and if people accept integrating the agreed strategy into their everyday lives. Obviously, these are very big 'ifs'. Changing people's attitudes and behaviours take persistence, passion and expertise. FOK continues to demonstrate that it is up for the challenge.

For more information on Friends of the Koala Inc. and koalas in the Northern Rivers, please visit: www.friendsofthekoala.org or email info@friendsofthekoala.org and follow us on Facebook.



Orphans Jemma and Jade cuddle up to Dragan.



Teddy (top), Opi and Tex at play in the Koala Kindy.



Lorraine and her husband Rick celebrating the Society's conferral of the Serventy Conservation Award in March.